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Book review: Interviewing for journalists

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excellent material presented in a very accessible way, and many people – not least practitioners such as Derryn Hinch – would benefit from considering the issues it raises. ■

ADAMS, Sally with HICKS, Wynford (2001)

Interviewing For Journalists, Routledge, London, 185pp. ISBN 0 41522913 (*hbk*)

Reviewed by Desley Bartlett

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As Adams notes in her introduction, interviewing is central to journalism — but recent books that recognise the reality of dwindling journalism resources and the bean counters' push to produce more stories more quickly, are thin on the ground. Hence, their review of telephone interviewing is an essential element for both beginning journalists and more experienced practitioners as is their 15-page section on "understanding interviewees".

The latest in the how-to Media Skills series, this book ably demonstrates what Adams and Hicks explored in their 1999 text *Writing for Journalists* – it's succinct, informs and entertains. From the chapter on "basics" (basic interviewing, basic principles, vox pops, press releases, rounds and conferences) to interviewing "special cases" (reluctant interviewees, children, vulnerable people and 'death knocks'), Adams gets to the point quickly but with clear and concise examples.

Adams sets the parameters early and offers her own definition for interviewing: "Here interviewing is asking people questions to gather material for publication, both information and quotes" (p.2).

The core of the book is the prearranged set-piece interview but with plenty of variations — telephone interviews, following-up press releases, tips and shared interviews.

The authors do not rehash basic newswriting skills, except for a few pars that restate "the six indispensable journalistic questions – who?, what?, when?, where?, why? and how? (p.7) But they might have included a chapter on structuring a news story and the always-important topic of style that Adams and Hicks explore in depth in *Writing for Journalists*.

The book is organized into 12 chapters: Introduction; Basics; Preparing and getting started; Interviewing techniques; Understanding interviewees and avoiding problems; Checking and editing quotes; Telephone interviewing; Note-taking and recording; Different interviewees (politicians, celebrities, special cases); Law and Ethics.

There are four excellent appendices that highlight unusual interviews or subjects and a comprehensive glossary of journalism terms that appears in each of the Media Skills texts.

For journalism students and trainees Adams and Hicks cover fundamental issues, such as numbering the pre-determined interview questions and matching up the answer to avoid confusion (p.25), plus an explanation of some body language signals. "Rubbing the back of the neck is read as a sign of frustration – dealing with something or someone that's a 'pain in the neck'." (p.61) And even some sage words about how to interpret handshakes (p.27).

They tackle head-on the influence of PR and in the section "What Can Go Wrong", they warn against allowing media advisers and PR operatives to take control of the interview (pp 67-74).

There are, however, a few recommendations that may raise ethical debates for some readers. In the section "Checking and editing quotes", Adams advises journalists to change quotes "as little as possible" (p.80), but to always quote accurately: "Just as they [sources] know how to spell their own names, they know what words they use – so don't rewrite quotes without prior permission." Purists would argue quotes are sacred and cannot be changed, with or without permission.

Other advice, although reflecting reality, might equally raise some eyebrows. "If you worry about the recording acoustic being audible, let your interviewee know you are recording them"; and "To make notes they [journalists] use shorthand, longhand scribble, tape recorders or memory...Some write reams during the interview, some write nothing. Some write surreptitiously on notebooks under the table or even in their jacket pockets..." (p.89-90).

These minor points are diluted by the extent and scope of the book, a highlight of which is Chapter 9, which provides an insight into the political interview. Here Adams extensively quotes political media advisor Harold Frayman, who spills the beans on the tricks politicians learn to use to 'handle' journalists. "So a study of your quarry is essential and the word 'quarry' is deliberately chosen. Few other interviewees today are so skilful or need such a careful, well-planned approach" (p.100).

There is no mention of the cultural sensitivity or diversity that one might expect to find in the "Different interviews – special

cases" section and this is a pity given the cross-cultural application of this otherwise excellent journalism text.

Interviewing for Journalists is British-centric with references to print and broadcast organisations that may not be familiar to other readers. For example, when discussing the preliminary research phase for an interview, there is an abstruse reference to "the Lady Porter investigation" (p.23), and the entertaining interviewer profiles of Andrew Duncan (p.117) and Lynda Lee-Potter (p.126) assume knowledge of their work.

Despite this, Adams and Hicks have come up with another highly useful journalism textbook that would suit journalism students or trainees anywhere as either an introductory or advanced studies reference. ■

MA, Eric Kit-wai (1999)

Culture, Politics and Television in Hong Kong

Routledge, 242pp, ISBN 0-415-17998-x

Reviewed by John Herbert

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This book is a fascinating insight into the way Hong Kong works in media terms and the mind of Hong Kong pre- and post-handover. It has an excellent historical development of television in Hong Kong since the 1960s. It has highly relevant case studies drawn from television programmes to show the mind of the present and past (and to some extent the future) Hong Kongers. It is a work of scholarship, most certainly, and this sometimes gives it an air of difficulty and occasional impenetrability which will probably appeal to media scientists the world over. But that is a small price to pay for the more general reader to learn some important truths about Hong Kong media and its people.

The book moves beyond the obvious media toward comparisons of the life and work of the Mainland Chinese and the Hong Kongers. It is somewhat of a model of how to study the media in a particular location. Hong Kong of course is a good place to do such a study because of its relative homogeneity and size. Right from the start the author sets out his stall clearly by referring to 'the